

A Phenomenological Investigation of Art Therapy to Assist Transition to a Psychosocial Residential Setting

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the use of art therapy to assist a young person with mental illness making a transition from long-term inpatient care to a psychosocial residential rehabilitation setting. An art-based phenomenological case study method was used to investigate a lived experience of this transition. The participant attended 11 art therapy sessions and used a visual journal daily over a six-week period shortly after the move to the new setting. Data analysis identified themes and visual features that appeared repeatedly in the images and enhanced the description of the participant's experience. Results showed that the transitional process of moving into a community setting involved a journey of learning, self-development and maturation. Art therapy helped the process of life style transition, especially through the use of a visual journal that functioned as a continuous outlet for guiding self expression and self-identity.

Introduction

There has been little research reported on a person's experience of transition to a community setting, and even less on how art therapy can assist someone in such a transition. The following study aimed to bridge some of the gaps in the research literature on the use of art therapy in assisting a young person with severe mental illness through her transition from a long-term inpatient stay to a psychosocial residential rehabilitation setting.

Review of the Literature

For the purposes of this case study, I was primarily interested in the experience of a person moving from a "locked" psychiatric inpatient ward, where the patient had lived for an extensive period with 24-hour supervision and care, to a psychosocial residential rehabilitation program where there were periods of time without immediate staff support. Such programs typically aim to assist young people in understanding and managing their mental illness, in developing positive relationships, and in achieving an independent lifestyle within a safe and supportive residential environment (Vernon, 2005).

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In a study of effective treatment models for people with mental illnesses, Miller (1994) interviewed participants with borderline personality disorder (BPD) who described their "struggle through life" as they tried to improve feelings of hopelessness, desperation, and inadequacy. The treatment of BPD has been known to be complicated and highly dependent on the individual's compliance with therapy and medication (Barlow & Durand, 2001). Although the focus in my research was not specifically on treating personality disorders but on art therapy processes that are beneficial to a mentally ill client, the ways in which art therapy processes can assist a person with BPD were indirectly explored.

O'Brien (1998) described the formation of BPD as occurring during childhood in an environment where there is a consistent and persistent lack of validation for emotional experience. In this environment, a child does not learn to accurately describe and express emotion, to modulate distress, or to rely on his or her own responses to events. Instead, the child tends to rely on surrounding peoples' responses in the environment for indicators of how to feel and respond to situations. Linehan (1993) added that out of this occurrence a pattern of anxiety related to emotional expression can form, which often leads to extreme acting out of emotional tension. The resulting persistent anxiety can inhibit the development of a strong sense of self and leave the person with a feeling of emptiness and a dependence on continuous interpersonal communication for defining the self (Linehan, 1993; Meares, 1992; Munroe-Blum & Marziali, 1995).

Clients with personality disorders, as was the case in my study, may benefit significantly from the psychosocial environment of residential rehabilitation programs. These clients have been found to show considerable improvement in many areas, including an increased quality of life, a decrease in the number of hospital admissions, and a decrease in incidents of self-harm, as compared to other residential treatment models (Chiesa, Fonagy, Holmes, & Drahorad, 2004). The psychosocial residential rehabilitation program in my study maintained a holistic approach to care in all areas of personal development, including liaising with family, friends and professionals in order to promote personal development and growth over an average stay of 2 years.

Gentleman Byers (1991) found art therapy to be beneficial for people in life stage transitions and/or developmental stagnation, particularly those who are suicidal. She believed that the tangible qualities that art provides allow

reflection on the internal pushes and external pulls of life. Art media may symbolically concretize a partial expression of a problem in its own personal perceived truth, thus allowing the therapeutic potential for hope and growth through a difficult period in a person's life. Gentleman Byers observed art making to be a very effective method to assist with developing a sense of self-identity.

Visual journaling used in a therapeutic capacity also is believed to be particularly beneficial in dealing with major life changes and crises, as it allows for needs, wishes, clarification of options and the potential to express emotions in a safe way (Capacchione, 2002). Malchiodi (1998) explained from her own experience that a visual journal enabled her to work through difficult life transitions. She described a range of expressions made possible in her journal, from spontaneous and simple images to more detailed and elaborate ones.

Method

Qualitative Research: Phenomenology

The following study aimed to provide an opportunity for a young woman to describe her experience of a key transitional period in her treatment and care using her own words and images. I chose a Husserlian-based phenomenological method as appropriate for this study. This approach seeks to return to "the things themselves," that is, the essence of things (Willis, 2001). Through reductive interpretation, the researcher focuses on understanding given phenomena without judgment by aiming to present findings exactly as they appear in conscious experience. The phenomenological method relies on the subjects' self-reports as well as an analysis of those reports that searches for patterns and themes (Hein & Austin, 2001; Moss, 1989; Spinelli, 1989; Willis, 2001).

Phenomenology takes the post-positivist stance that researchers cannot help but subjectively influence the conclusions they make (Hein & Austin, 2001). However, it does not claim that it can capture what is known of an experience exactly, like a photo. Rather, it attempts to recreate a phenomenon as it appears to the participant. Phenomenology theorists argue that the meaning of an experience is not inherent in objects but is located in the individual's life (Willis, 2001). They ask such questions as "what is the significance of this experience to the person?" and "what did she or he make of it?"

Phenomenology, due to its open-ended orientation and pursuit of an unbiased stance, lends itself to exploring art expression and art therapy. It aims to assist people who are trying to find themselves in the world through visually expressive self-projections and looking inward to create new meaning. Active participation in art making helps them work through dilemmas that have arisen due to difficulties within themselves and with others. This process empowers them to apply their newly acquired skills to other areas of their life, transcend self-centeredness, and become participating members of the world (Betensky, 1995, 2001).

The design of this study incorporated different methods of inquiry following Junge and Linesch's (1993) argument that in the field of art therapy there are many different ways of knowing. By judiciously combining different qualitative methods one can create a richer piece of research that pushes the boundaries of theoretical knowledge to investigate the complexities of human experiences (Kincheloe, 2005). Thus, the study design included both a single case study framework and an art-based research approach. This format allowed for in-depth, client-centered exploration of both verbal and non-verbal phenomena as part of the therapeutic process of transition.

My interest was in capturing the essence of someone's lived experience in a way that highlighted her imaginative nature as well as the energy and dynamics of her artwork. Levine (2000) argued that imaginative research is needed in the field of art therapy in order to appreciate the aesthetic and vibrant dimensions of the discipline. He emphasized the importance of incorporating other modalities that use words to create a richly enhanced portrayal of a participant's experience. In this study, the participant's own text and verbal dialogue was used with images to explore the relationship between the different expressive forms, as well as the differences these modalities communicated.

Description of Case Study Participant

This study's single participant had been staying in an inpatient psychiatric unit long-term with 24-hour care and was moving into a psychosocial residential rehabilitation service located in her community with greater reliance on independent decision-making and self responsibility. Sarah (pseudonym) was a 16-year-old female with a provisional diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder. According to her psychiatrist's report, other issues included family conflict, several medication overdoses in the past 6 months, frequent cutting and burning since childhood, suicidal ideation, pseudo hallucinations, low mood, and frequent limited food intake. Sarah had been an inpatient in a secure psychiatric ward for seven months prior to the start of the study. When the study began, Sarah was receiving additional intensive mental health support from a child and adolescent mental health service. At the psychosocial residential rehabilitation program the staff was on a 24-hour roster, whereby there was one staff member on site at all times for the first 6 weeks. Additionally, a case worker met with Sarah on a continuous basis. Sarah attended a girls' secondary school three times a week. Ethical considerations such as obtaining written consent and protecting confidentiality were followed and maintained.

Treatment Method and Data Collection

The data collected during the study consisted of (a) a visual journal that was completed by the participant on a daily basis during the 6-week period of sessions, (b) artwork completed in the sessions, (c) session notes from the researcher, and (d) the researcher's post-session reflective responses to the participant's artwork.

Table 1 Summary of Sarah's Lived Experience

Text-based Theme	Repeated Visual Features	Sample Images	Sarah's Themes of Lived Experience (by the Researcher)
<i>'Feeling Trapped'</i>	Barbed Wire Barrier Shadow Figures Noose Flower 'Hollow Man' Cliff Patient Number		There seems to be ambivalence around feeling incarcerated or bound and freedom or choice to do something about it.
<i>'Emotional pain turned into physical pain'</i>	Cut Wrists Rib Cage Teary Eyes Noose Cut Knee Blood		Revealing the pain and suffering through cutting and starving herself. She is crying for help and wants to express her pain but is fearful.
<i>'Nobody listens, nobody cares'</i>	Train Tracks Pills Noose Blood Shadow Figures Teary Eyes Cut Knee		She expresses loneliness and sadness. She looks to suicidal ideation as her only option.

Sarah attended 11 one-hour art therapy sessions held twice weekly over a 6-week period. As her therapist, I conducted these sessions using an open-ended, person-centered approach. The length of time and number of sessions were approved by the program manager of the residential service as suitable for establishing trust and for creating a therapeutic relationship during the transition period.

Most of the sessions began with a facilitated "in-dwelling" of Sarah's journal entries. This involved the two of us looking in-depth at each journal entry or image in order to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the images and their meanings. A period of art making followed and was directed by Sarah, who chose either to further explore the subject matter in the journal entries or to work with themes that emerged spontaneously. I would then ask Sarah if she would like to amplify her image or deepen any important aspect of it by developing a subsequent image. "Amplification" (Lett, 2001) is an effective phenomenological technique used to obtain a succinct and deeper understanding of the image for both the participant

and the researcher. Additionally, in order to gain the most precise yet fundamental essence of the image, a multimodal approach was offered. In this study, a multimodal exploration occurred through an open-ended, verbal discussion about the image, written responses from the participant after art making, and the visual creation of a second image that developed or amplified a previous image.

Data Analysis

As the researcher, I immersed myself in the data several times, to develop an overall, in-depth sense of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. I identified core qualities by searching for recurring phrases in Sarah's journal entries and similar meanings and images in her descriptions and artwork. Core qualities were coded and placed into groupings; two or more recurring or similar phrases, meanings, and images were grouped and identified as a theme. Themes that emerged from the visual phenomena were reviewed and compared with the text-based themes to

Table 1 Summary of Sarah's Lived Experience, Continued

Text-based Theme	Repeated Visual Features	Sample Images	Sarah's Themes of Lived Experience (by the Researcher)
<i>'The conflicts between different parts of self'</i>	'Squishy' 'Patient Number' 'Lisa' Sharp Rocks Eye Noose Barbed Wire Cut Knee Teary Eye Train Tracks		Her different sides: 'Squishy,' as her positive side who is stuck; 'Sarah's patient number,' as her negative side that is alone and afraid; or 'Lisa,' as her darkest side when she is suicidal. There is confusion about who to be.
<i>'Fear to express true self'</i>	Teary Eyes Barbed Wire Blood Hollow Man		She often portrays being all right when actually she is fearful to express her sadness and pain to others.
<i>'Beginning to face inner thoughts and fears'</i>	Eye Shadow Figures Teary Eyes Noose		Beginning to face the sorrow and the pain of reality and ignoring the hatred and anger in her voices.

find common features. The repeated visual features found to be prevalent in the text-based themes were clustered into like-groupings against the overarching text-based theme groups. These groupings of core qualities were then organized into a table with the associated artwork placed underneath. This resulted in a collection of corroborating text- and visual-based themes that allowed further enhancement of understanding Sarah's experience.

As a further step in the data analysis, the researcher's "intersubjective response" was obtained from each artwork (Lett, 2001). Its purpose was to externalize the tacit knowledge that I had gained from being present during the creation of the art images and during discussions about the images with Sarah. I responded intersubjectively by turning inward to seek a deeper and more extended understanding of the meanings of the themes in the participant's experience (Lett, 2001). The process is similar to indwelling but is derived from the subjective experience of the researcher as he or she relates to the subjectivity of the participant.

These text-based and visual themes from the participant data that I had generated as the researcher were then taken

back to the participant for review and to verify for accuracy. I also consulted with Sarah's case worker to discuss the themes as well as Sarah's progress in the program. This consultation was held approximately 2 months after the sessions had been completed. The verified data were then used to develop an enhanced description of the participant's experience of transitioning from one environment into another.

Results

The text-based themes alongside the visual cluster groupings are presented in Table 1. The repeated visual features (in bold) were found to be the most prevalent in the particular text-based theme. I created "Sarah's themes of lived experience" through a synthesis of the text-based themes and repeated visual features, using an intersubjective response. These themes are as follows:

A sense of uncertainty. The transition of moving into the rehabilitation program began with Sarah being uncertain about where she wanted to be. As reflected in her artwork having to do with feelings about moving into the pro-

gram, Sarah stated that she had two choices, either “to jump off the cliff into the water or to stay on top of the cliff” and that the subject in her artwork had a “flat expression” because “she doesn’t feel happy or sad about moving into the program.” The first theme, titled “Feeling trapped,” seemed to convey this experience of feeling bound and not having any choices. At the same time, the artwork portrayed some freedom and choice.

Early in the transition, during Session 4, Sarah stated that finding the independence required to live in the rehabilitation program was quite difficult. She had become used to the constant care and support from the hospital staff. Sarah explained that she was “going through a second childhood,” one that she never had with her mother and wanted to be around people who could love and protect her.

Exploring difficult emotions through art therapy.

During the middle period of the art therapy sessions, Sarah began to test the boundaries of the rehabilitation program and her self-harming behaviors increased. With the second theme, “Emotional pain turned into physical pain,” she explored her self-harming issues and how they were an emotional release for her. As Miller (1994) noted, people with mental illnesses often increase their self-harming behaviors as a method of coping in times of social anxiety, difficulties communicating, and change.

With the third theme, “Nobody listens, nobody cares,” Sarah began to explore the feelings attached to her self-harm and suicidal ideation, including the loneliness and sadness she experienced as a result of not feeling that anywhere was “home.” This relates not only to the realities of the transition she was undergoing but to difficulties in identity formation and adequate expression of emotions, issues that often occur with people diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Consequently, there may be constant anxiety and tension as a result of emotional expression, which is often acted out through self-harming behavior (Linehan, 1993; Meares, 1992; Munroe-Blum & Marziali, 1995; O’Brien, 1998).

The emergence of “Lisa” to assist the release of strong emotions. After a particularly serious self-harming incident, Sarah created the character “Lisa” in her visual journal and later as a sculpture in Session 9 (Figure 1). In creating the artwork, she used fast and vigorous movements to release the emotion felt about the incident. In Session 10, Sarah explained how “Lisa” symbolized a release for her as the “red represented blood” (a result of cutting her entire body) and the “black facial features represented solace.” She added that “Lisa” was a representation of her most of the time, “especially at the moment.” This was significant for Sarah, not only in discovering a means other than self-harming to release emotions, but also in beginning to articulate her emotions. As someone who may have felt disconnected from her inner self, the art-making process assisted Sarah in ordering the chaos and producing a sense of relief, with graphic representation making it easier to identify her internal state.

Deeper discovery of the inner self. In the later sessions, Sarah explored her identity and began articulating the difficulties she had with her internal self with greater



Figure 1 ‘Lisa’

depth. The fourth theme, “The conflicts between different parts of self,” was an exploration of her positive side (that was stuck) called “Squishy,” her negative side (alone and afraid) called her “patient number,” and “Lisa” (her darkest side) as discussed earlier (Figures 1, 2 &3).

The fifth theme, “Fear to express true self,” also marked a significant stage as Sarah explored and discovered the fact that how she appeared to people was quite different from how she felt on the inside. In other words, she realized that she was holding in feelings of pain and suffering and not communicating them to others.

The sixth theme, “Beginning to face inner thoughts and fears,” was explored during the final session and reflected the fact that Sarah was starting to face her fears. She was beginning to show insight into her condition and the personal issues she needed to work through. She may also have been starting to accept the fact that she could begin to use the support provided in the rehabilitation program. We discussed this when we met to verify the themes identified in the data analysis. Sarah continued to use her visual journal and painted further artworks. At this later stage she was also accessing her case worker to explore issues that had arisen in her journal.

Becoming an individual. The entire transitional period involved a great amount of effort by Sarah to desire change and to want to develop herself. As Adams, Hayes, and Hopson (1976) stated, a transition involves new behavioral responses to a new situation and can be very stressful. However, as was evident in my discussion with Sarah’s case worker, although initially ambivalent about moving into the rehabilitation service, Sarah was now becoming stable and independent. The case worker noted that when Sarah first moved in she wanted to be “looked after” but at the same time viewed life dichotomously. However, now Sarah identified more as an individual and was able to see the “grey areas” of life and situations.

Discussion

Overall, my results showed that Sarah’s transitional process of moving into a community setting involved a journey of learning, self-development, and maturation. Her



Figure 2 'Squishy'

transition began with a sense of uncertainty and ambivalence about moving into the rehabilitation program. She proceeded to explore difficult emotions, particularly around her self-harm and suicidal ideation, which became quite significant during a crisis period in the transition to greater independence. Sarah was able to project and resolve some of her difficult emotions through the creation of the "Lisa" figure. She then went through a deeper exploration of her sense of having an inner self by exploring its different aspects, particularly the positive and negative sides of herself. This enabled Sarah to begin to acknowledge that she had been fearful of facing her inner pain and suffering and as a result was not revealing her true self. Sarah began to show insight into her personal issues and acceptance that she could use the supports of the psychosocial residential program to work further on these issues.

Art Therapy Processes Guiding Self-Expression and Personal Development

The individual art therapy sessions and visual journaling acted as an important means by which Sarah could communicate and develop her emotions in a way that other modalities, such as talking, may not have been as effective. This was evident in the fact that Sarah was not openly verbal in the residential community during this period and sought little staff support, unless in a crisis.

Sarah approached the art therapy sessions by expressing herself through visual and tactile work rather than by verbal communication alone. This concurs with Liebmann's (1990) research, which stated that art in therapy is very beneficial for those who are unable to accurately express their emotions verbally. Additionally, as Gentleman Byers (1991) suggested, art making allows exploration and reflection of the push and pull of life by symbolically expressing a problem in its own personal perceived truth. The therapeutic holding environment, art materials, and artwork created all provide an opportunity to see the potential for hope and growth through a difficult period, such as a transition in one's life.

As Rubin (2005) and Malchiodi (1998) posited, because art taps into the unconscious, art therapy allows thoughts and feelings to be expressed that may otherwise be



Figure 3 'Patient Number'

restrained or denied. The themes identified in Sarah's phenomenological exploration demonstrate her investigation of personal issues that were previously unresolved and continued to influence her life experiences. This was particularly evident in the way Sarah moved continuously between the themes; although there may have been precedence for one theme at any given time, other themes would emerge and become a focus of her attention simultaneously.

For Sarah, art therapy seemed to be a safe method of disclosing private information about her feelings. Although she did not express any feedback about the sessions directly, she regularly attended them and completed her visual journal every day. Sarah's approach to the art making was exceptionally prolific. She produced a large amount of quality artworks, which helped not only to give expression to her experience but also to enhance the overall effectiveness and depth of this study.

Using the Visual Journal for Expression and Self-Identity

The visual journal assisted Sarah in developing her abilities in self-expression. It encouraged and promoted self-expression on many levels, particularly in providing a space for further growth and change in a unique way. This finding concurs with Baldwin's (1977) research, which stated that keeping a journal connects the self and creates an awareness of one's own personal processes through expressing one's inner language when used on a regular basis. The visual journal may be particularly beneficial when used to assist with transitional stages or stressful times because it allows for uncertainties and fears to be expressed in a safe but meaningful way (Capacchione, 2002; Makin, 2000; Malchiodi, 1998).

Sarah was able to use her journal to identify the issues she wanted to explore in-depth during the sessions. For example, in Journal Entry 2 Sarah wrote "an angel doesn't eat so they can feel the pain of hunger," an idea that was explored later in Sessions 2 and 3 with "this is a representa-

tion of bones. The figure likes the feeling of pain as it makes her feel in control, it makes her feel that she has power." The visual journal allowed Sarah to explore a theme in her own time and then go further in-depth with the assistance of the contained space that the session provided.

Additionally, the contained modality of the journal enabled Sarah to have a private, self-reflective space after sessions to explore issues that had arisen. For example, in the text-based theme, "The conflicts between different parts of self," the character "Squishy" was initially explored in Journal Entry 4, "I walk a lonely road the only one I have ever known," then again during Sessions 4 and 5, further in Journal Entries 6, 7, and 9, and in Session 10. This freedom and space to go back and forth between issues facilitated Sarah's further learning about her inner self.

The journal seemed to be particularly important when exploring issues around self-harm and suicidal ideation. For example, the image-based themes "Externalizing the pain" and "Nobody listens, nobody cares" were mainly explored privately through Sarah's journal. She was then able to begin articulating her emotions and feelings through writing, or through more openly expressive artworks.

The design of the research study meant that the journal also acted as a means by which Sarah could continuously tap into her unconscious and creative processes. This was evident in the way she constantly utilized it, even after the sessions ended, as a self-therapy tool. This function extends Tate and Longo's (2002) conceptualization of therapy, which they view as a process involving the meeting ground of inner and outer worlds as experienced by the client. Therapy aims to promote favorable change in personality and life that continues long after the session. Sarah's use of the journal encouraged and maintained the potential for this favorable change.

Working through issues independently also helped to promote Sarah's maturation process and self-care. As Ganim and Fox (1999) suggested, this type of personal communication with the self is empowering, as issues are worked through independently. This enables one to have the insight and clarity to explore changes that are taking place within the self as well as possible decisions that could resolve conflicts and issues.

Finally, using the journal through the transition process follows Vernon's (2005) model of recovery in psychosocial rehabilitation, where the emphasis is on the person's own agency in recovery rather than reliance on the clinical system. The journal assists in developing a new purpose and meaning in a client's life that is personal and unique as he or she grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness (Roberts & Wolfson, 2004).

The Importance of Creating a Safe Space and a Positive Relationship.

Sarah's phenomenological experience in using art therapy to support her transition highlighted the importance of creating a safe space and developing a positive therapeutic relationship. In the initial sessions she appeared emotionally flat, difficult to engage, and resistant to showing expres-

sion. Limited issues were explored in the artwork. But as treatment progressed, Sarah became relaxed, open to discussion, independent in exploration of topics, and confident in initiating discussion as well as articulating when she did not want to discuss an issue. This progression may be associated with a growing confidence or trust in the therapeutic relationship, as a result of the humanistic person-centered approach taken by the researcher, incorporating the views of van der Kolk, Hostetler, Herron, and Fisler (1994); Anthony (1993); and Deegan's (1996) regarding a supportive and encouraging therapist.

Conclusion

This research study identified a range of beneficial aspects in the utilization of art therapy to assist a young person with mental illness through her transition from a long-term inpatient stay to a rehabilitation setting. The transitional process of moving into a community setting involved a journey of learning, self-development, and personal growth. Art therapy supported this transition, especially with the client's visual journal, which provided a continuous outlet to express and explore the inner self. This progress was further enhanced by the humanistic person-centered approach used by the researcher, freedom of choice of materials, and the time and space that the setting permitted. The outcomes show that art therapy and visual journaling have potential in working with clients in this setting. As the design of the research involved a case study, results cannot be generalized as representative of other people in similar circumstances. Additionally, due to the length and focus of the study, many aspects of the session forms were not explored, such as the range of media and motions used in completing the artwork. It would also be beneficial in future research to solicit feedback from other professionals, fellow residents, and family or friends involved with the client to gain a further understanding of how the approach assisted in other areas of the client's life. The findings of this study and its limitations warrant further investigation both in this and in similar settings.

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